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BIOGRAPHY

Dame Rebecca West (1892–1983), who changed her name from Cicily Isabel Fairfield, was the youngest daughter of a piano teacher and a journalist who abandoned his family in 1901. As a young woman, Rebecca turned first to acting and then to writing; she took her chosen name from a rebellious Ibsen character whom she played on the stage. Beginning at the feminist weekly *The Freewoman*, West won lasting renown as a journalist, critic, and novelist, producing such diverse works as *Black Lamb* and *Grey Falcon* (a study of pre-World War II Yugoslavia); the novels *The Thinking Reed* and *The Return of the Soldier*; and *The Meaning of Treason*, about the trial of Lord Haw-Haw (William Joyce). Though she had planned *The Fountain Overflows* as the first volume of a tetralogy, she only completed (and did not fully edit) the next two volumes, *This Real Night* and *Cousin Rosamund*, before she died.

THE FOUNTAIN OVERFLOWS

by Rebecca West

Introduction by Andrea Barrett

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“A real Dickensian Christmas pudding of a book—full of incident, full of family delights, full of parties and partings, strange bits of London, the lobby of the House of Commons, a classic murder with portraits of the murderer, the murdereed and a couple of innocent bystanders, bill collectors, kitchen fires, good food, and a considerable quota of ghosts. West’s is a world that is a delight to enter and to live in, warm and vital, and constantly entertaining.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In this rich, insightful novel, Rose Aubrey recounts her childhood as a member of a remarkable but impoverished family in turn-of-the-century England. Rose and her twin sister, Mary, are being trained by their frail, eccentric mother to be concert pianists. The twins and their beloved mother look forward to a time when the two girls will lead exciting lives as professional musicians. Meanwhile, Rose and Mary’s adored younger brother, Richard Quin, progresses promisingly with the flute. Rose’s pretty, snooty older sister, Cordelia, however, has no artistic talent. Her mother and the other children realize this, but Cordelia does not. She insists on becoming a violinist, and even finds some success as a child soloist because uneducated audiences can’t perceive the lack of artistry behind her technically competent playing. This infuriates Rose, who sees her older sister’s terrible violin performance as a family tragedy.

Rose’s cousin, Rosamund, who comes to live with the Aubreys, doesn’t play an instrument and insists that she “can’t do anything well” [p. 124]. Yet Rose discovers that her cousin has other virtues. Rosamund is kind and generous and, unlike the twins, she doesn’t resent Cordelia’s “unmusical” playing [p. 14]. Instead she admires Cordelia’s prettiness and tries to get the other children to admire her as well. Rosamund is a calm, steadying presence in the Aubrey household and her cousins quickly come to love her.

Still, the Aubreys’ lives are not easy. Piers, the children’s brilliant but hapless father, has led the family to suburban London, where he edits a minor newspaper. His wife struggles for solvency and stability, but Piers’s irresponsibility always defeats her. Despite their mother’s worries, the children remain certain that all will be fine. Even as their father drifts away from the family, the children flourish through their rich imaginations and their unusual, even unearthly, adventures. Desperate murderesses and hidden masterpieces, destructive poltergeists and magical horses are captured in Rose’s sharp, perceptive gaze, as are the complex challenges of adulthood.

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Letty Fox: Her Luck

Christina Stead
(introduction by Tim Parks)

A High Wind in Jamaica

Richard Hughes
(introduction by Francine Prose)

The Go-Between

L. P. Hartley
(introduction by Colm Tóibín)

Eustace and Hilda

L. P. Hartley
(introduction by Anita Brookner)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris*

Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep*

Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Fountain Overflows* is a semi-autobiographical novel that echoes many of the events and individuals of Rebecca West's childhood. In particular, the character of Cordelia is based on West's older sister, Letitia Fairfield, who hated the novel and her depiction in it. Yet West had dedicated the book to her. Is Cordelia as despicable as Rose thinks she is? Is Cordelia treated fairly by her sisters and her mother?
2. What is the role of art in this novel? For example, what is the conflict between Cordelia's idea of music and her mother's?
3. The spectral horses, raging poltergeists, and Rose's ability to read minds appear rather unexpectedly in an otherwise realistic narrative. What is the effect of having these elements in the novel? Why might West have included them?
4. West has been called a "stern moralist" and, as Andrea Barrett points out in her introduction, *The Fountain Overflows* often shows the conflict between good and evil within the characters themselves. How does West address moral questions through the Aubrey family? How does Piers's ethical code differ from that of his wife?
5. Do you sympathize with Piers's irresponsibility? Is he right to be willing to go to jail for Queenie's cause? Does his departure at the end of the book change your feelings about his earlier actions?
6. Do you think Mrs. Aubrey brings her children up correctly and treats her husband well? How would you assess the balance of power in the Aubreys' marriage?
7. Rosamund stammers, isn't conventionally clever, and can't play an instrument, but she can beat Mr. Aubrey at chess and has a keen understanding of music and people. In the subsequent volumes of West's tetralogy, Rosamund becomes an increasingly important character; the third book is entitled *Cousin Rosamund*. Why is Rosamund so special? What does her name (Rose-of-the-world) illuminate about her relationship to Rose, the narrator and heroine?
8. West had written for a feminist journal and, as a young woman, was an ardent feminist. In what ways does the novel reveal feminist concerns or insights? How are they expressed? Is this effective?
9. *The Fountain Overflows* chronicles the Aubreys' descent into genteel poverty. In this they are the mirror image of the "common" but rich Phillips family. What role does class play in the novel? Does West confound or reinforce your earliest impressions of such lower-class characters as Miss Beevor and Aunt Lily?